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Shultz Defends Administration Efforts To 'Make Gadhafi Nervous'

Secretary of State George P. Shultz met with a group of about 20 reporters Thursday evening at the United Nations Plaza Hotel in New York. During a question-and-answer session he was asked several questions about an article in Thursday's Washington Post reporting that the Reagan administration launched a deception and disinformation campaign in August against Libya's Moammar Gadhafi. The excerpts include all of Shultz's comments on Libya:

There's a published account today of a meeting in mid-August, I think Aug. 14, attended by you, Mr. [John M.] Poindexter and some others in which a decision was reportedly made to launch a disinformation campaign concerning Libya, reports that information was made available to newspapers, including The Wall Street Journal, that produced stories indicating more concern about Libya than the intelligence reports actually caused. Can you comment on these? Did this happen? Is there a disinformation campaign against Libya?

I never comment on classified material or meetings of that kind, but I will say this, that [Col. Moammar] Gadhafi has involved Libya in numerous acts of terrorism which have killed many people, including some Americans. I think he is basically an outlaw. We have taken action against him. We have been glad to see that others have also found a great deal of intelligence about what he's doing and have also taken action.

It was a very good thing that this was recognized at the Tokyo summit and Libya was identified by name. And it was also very interesting that, when we took our action against Libya [April 14], contrary to the expectations of many, the Arab world did not rally to his side. And that probably had something to do with the very evident unease and sense of dislocation, from all of our intelligence, Gadhafi exhibited.

Insofar as he is concerned, we think he's a menace. And we want to see the activities of Libya stop. So exactly what we are and intend to do about it, I don't think it's appropriate for me to say. But we have shown that we're willing to take direct action. We have shown that we have applied a very broad range of sanctions to his activities. We do have various things going on that are difficult for him to know exactly what they mean that perhaps keep him off balance. And frankly, I don't have any problems with a little psychological warfare against Gadhafi.

Even if it involves . . . .

It's very easy, and you people in the news business enjoy not allowing the United States to do anything in secret if you can help it. So, if the fleet moves from one place to another, you're bound and determined to report it. Even though we might want to have it operate secretly, it's very difficult for that to happen.

So we can absolutely bank on the fact that, if the fleet does something or other, you'll scream. And Gadhafi'll hear it. The fleet may or may not be getting ready to do something.

What about the AIDS quote? Can you just clear that one up?

The what?

You were quoted as saying in a joking way that you hoped Gadhafi could get AIDS [acquired immune deficiency syndrome].

I have no comment on statements that somebody who probably wasn't there incorrectly attribute to somebody who was there . . . . I think the business of talking about meetings and so on is a despicable thing that people in the United States government do, and I'm not going to consider it . . . .

Was there any sign of increased Libyan terrorist activity in August? And number two, are you denying that this meeting took place, or are you not commenting? I mean, this is a very serious charge that you had a meeting to, where you decided to mount a disinformation campaign.

Why is that a charge? If I were a private citizen reading about it, and I read that my government was trying to confuse somebody who was conducting terrorist acts and murdering Americans, I'd say, "Gee, I hope it's true." I don't see why you think this is a charge.

The issue is a deliberate program of misinformation, and it's not only Gadhafi who gets confused but the American people who get confused.

Without trying to be—without being able to be precise, you can't plot—it's difficult to plot whether there's an increase or not an increase. There is a disposition toward it by Gadhafi and Libya. For quite a period of time, it was clear he was thrown way off, not only by our actions, but by the actions of the Europeans in expelling all of these people as they found information.

So there was a relatively quiescent period. We felt that it was beginning to change for various reasons. Precise intelligence right now is not altogether clear, but there have been a number of terrorist incidents recently or—incidents isn't the word—tragedies, horrors. And I don't rule out that Libya was involved, for example, in the Karachi [hijacking]. I'm not saying they are but I wouldn't rule it out.

So, yes, there has been some increase in sort of the volume of what you see from various intelligence sources. Different people might evaluate it in different ways. But, nevertheless, there is substance there.

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I would hate to see this finish without clarification on the issue of disinformation. Let me pose it in a different way. It seems to me as a journalist that, if the government is knowingly misinforming or lying to further a foreign policy goal, that causes me problems. What you are saying is, as long as it furthers a foreign policy goal, that is okay?

I know of no decision to have people go out and tell lies to the media. I think, however, that if there are ways in which we can make Gadhafi nervous, why shouldn't we? And I described one of them. That is not deceiving you but just using your predictable tendencies to report things that we try to keep secret, so we'll label it a big secret and you'll find out about it and you'll report it. We know that. The higher the classification, the quicker you'll report it. So you're predictable in that sense.

But I don't believe in telling lies myself. I would call your attention, however, to—and this is, I probably shouldn't even say this because you'll give the wrong interpretation—but there's a wonderful book that you might read that was written about World War II. And the title of it is a quote from Winston Churchill, who said, "In time of war, the truth is so precious, it must be attended by a bodyguard of lies."

And the book is about the very great effort to deceive the Nazis and to float reports of one kind or another that would make them think that something was about to happen that wasn't about to happen and so on.

There was a declaration of war at the time.

And I think that insofar as Gadhafi is concerned, we don't have a declaration of war but we have something pretty darn close to it.

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